

What Thanksgiving Is About

Ephesians 5:19-20; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

I am an Atlanta Braves fan, so I was really excited when they made it to the World Series in 1991. But a championship was not to be that year, for they lost to the Minnesota Twins. They went again to the World Series in 1992, but that year they lost to the Toronto Blue Jays. So when the Braves finally won the World Series in 1995, I was thrilled. Watching them play brought back some wonderful memories of playing baseball when I was a kid, and I remembered my coaches who gave their time and sacrificed so much for us so we could play ball.

I located one of those coaches, a man named Bernard Brantley, and wrote him a letter, thanking him for giving so much and being such an important part of my life. I mailed it and didn't think about it anymore. More than ten years went by, and I received news that Mr. Brantley had passed away. I sent an email to one of his sons, Tim, who was also a member of that team, expressing my sympathies for him and his family.

Tim emailed me in a few days and told me things about his dad that I did not know, things that made his dad a very special man. He described his dad's funeral service, and told how each of the sons eulogized their father. But let me read a portion of Tim's email:

The last thing we did, however, was Allen [the oldest son] finished off the eulogy by reading a letter that Dad received from one of his former players, a letter that meant the world to Dad and one that he had framed and hung in a very prominent place in his living room. It talked about how the young man visited the Atlanta Braves games in St. Louis and how each time he looked down at the field at the coaches, he saw our dad. It talked about how Dad, instead of losing his patience with the young man when he couldn't do the things he wanted to do on the field, kept encouraging him to continue trying his best. It talked about the impact that Dad, giving of his time, made in the life of the young man. It was signed by the young man.....Rocky Henriques, Center Field and First Base. After Allen finished reading the letter, Mom cried.....pretty much for the first time. We all joined her. There were not many dry eyes at that point.

As his time and efforts made the difference in your life, so many years ago, your letter made a difference in the life of my dad in his last years. For that, I'll forever be grateful.

I did not know that my letter would mean so much to Mr. Brantley, and I certainly didn't think he would frame it and hang it in his living room. I learned, though, that my letter was the only time anyone from those years contacted Mr. Brantley to say "Thank you." Sometimes saying "Thank you" can be very valuable, both for us and the person receiving our gratitude.

But never is it more important than when we are expressing our gratitude to the Lord. In our passages for today Paul was focusing on the themes of praise and thanksgiving. But pay attention to some other important words he uses—"always," "continually," and "in all circumstances." He's writing about an attitude that should be a constant for us Christians—an attitude of the heart, part of our beings, who we really are.

But life sometimes doesn't turn out like we expect or desire, so how can we have an attitude of heart so that we are "always giving thanks to God the Father"? Perspective makes all the difference in most areas of our lives, and thanksgiving is no exception. For example, you may have heard of the young lady away from home at college, who wrote her parents the following letter:

Dear Mom and Dad: Sorry I haven't written sooner. My arm really was broken. I broke it, and my left leg, when I jumped from the second floor of my dormitory...when we had the fire. We were lucky. A young service station attendant saw the blaze and called the Fire Department. They were there in minutes. I was in the hospital for a few days. Paul, the service station attendant, came to see me every day. And because it was taking so long to get our dormitory livable again, I moved in with him. He has been so nice. I must admit that I am pregnant. Paul and I plan to get married as soon as he can get a divorce. I hope things are fine at home. I'm doing fine, and will write more when I get the chance. Love, your daughter, Susie.

P.S. None of the above is true. But I did get a "C" in Sociology and flunked Chemistry. I just wanted you to receive this news in its proper perspective.

You see, perspective does make a difference, doesn't it? To be thankful always, we need a proper understanding of our situation and who we are, and Who God is. Then we will be able to give thanks to the Lord—always. It has been said that there are at least three attitudes that rob us of our perspective and prevent us from being thankful as we should.

One is pride. We are all guilty of this one. This is the attitude that says “I’ve worked hard for what I have—nobody ever gave me anything.” It may be true that we’ve worked hard and it may be true that we didn’t have anything handed to us. But the problem with this kind of attitude is that we act as though we have no need to give thanks to God, since we think we’re the ones responsible for what we have.

Another attitude that hinders our thankfulness is either a critical spirit or constant complaining. The person who is always complaining is not a very thankful person. I read once of a man who had a reputation of complaining about everything. Nothing was ever right. His pastor adopted him as a project, and began to try to help him find things for which he could be thankful. That particular year, his farm crop was the best for miles around. So the pastor dropped by one day to congratulate him, and said “You must be very happy. Everyone is saying how healthy your potatoes look this year!” To which the farmer replied, “True, they’re pretty good, but what am I going to do when I need bad ones to feed the pigs?”

A third attitude that hinders our thankfulness is carelessness. We’re probably all guilty of this one. We just take things for granted. Ralph Waldo Emerson once remarked “If the stars should appear but one night every thousand years, how man would marvel and stare.”

A little poem by Courtland Sayers expressed this very well:
*5,000 breathless dawns all new; 5,000 flowers fresh in dew.
5,000 sunsets wrapped in gold; 1 million snowflakes served ice cold.
5 quiet friends, 1 baby’s love; 1 white sea with clouds above.
1 June night in a fragrant wood, 1 heart that loved and understood.
I wondered when I waked that day—in God’s name—how could I ever pay.*

You remember in the Old Testament that the Israelites grumbled because they had no food in the desert. So God miraculously sent the manna to cover the ground every day except the Sabbath. Then they started to grumble because it was the same thing every day. Every single day they had a wonderful miracle straight from the hand of Almighty God, but they were not satisfied. Pride, complaining and carelessness can each prevent us from being truly thankful for all that God has given us.

So to help us have focus on what Thanksgiving is really about, let’s think about what the Bible says about giving thanks.

1 Our Thanksgiving should be expressed.

David said in Psalm 107, “*Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good.*” We should express our thanks to God on a regular basis. Not only should we express our thanks to God because He is good, but also because it helps us a great deal as well. Psychologists tell us that sincere gratitude is a very healthy habit, and in fact, can even impact our health.

Leading psychologists tell us that people who are happy are less likely to have psychological or social problems, less likely to feel stressed and more likely to be physically healthy. Researchers have identified five key factors that are found in people who consider themselves to be happy: optimism, zest for life, curiosity, the ability to love and be loved, and gratitude.

Expressing our gratitude is good for us, emotionally, physically and spiritually. But most of all God appreciates the expression of our thanks. It glorifies Him and lifts up His Name before others. It draws us closer to Him.

In the Old Testament, we frequently see the Hebrew people thanking God for the glories of the universe, as in Psalm 19:1—“*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*” When the news was good, they thanked God for his goodness and wonderful deeds, as in 1 Chronicles 16:8—“*Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done.*” Or even when the news was bad, they also gave thanks, because they believed that He is a just God and knows what is best. Job 1:21 tells us that when Job had received all the bad news about his children and his livestock and servants, his response was “*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.*”

But failing to express our thankfulness can have the opposite effect. Listen to Romans 1:21—“*For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.*”

That seems to say that people who are ungrateful to God will soon pull away from Him, and their hearts will grow hard and cold. So we see that our thanksgiving must be expressed.

2 Our Thanksgiving must be constantly growing.

And as our thanksgiving grows, it should include at least two things. *First*, it should include **the blessings of life**. Have you thanked God lately for a sink full of dirty dishes? Think about it—why are the dishes dirty? Because you had food to eat. You will use water to wash those dishes—many people around the world don't have clean water. We are blessed in so many ways, but our prayers are often very general in nature. We say, "Thank you, God, for all your blessings" but what blessings are we really thankful for?

Second, our thanksgiving should also include **the troubles of life**. This can be a tough one. First Thessalonians 5:18 reads, "*Give thanks in all circumstances.*" Ephesians 5:20 says, "*always giving thanks.*" Paul must have had a pretty good life, in order to make statements like that, right? No, Paul suffered in some pretty remarkable ways for the cause of Christ. In one of his letters he tells that he had been run out of town, beaten, whipped, imprisoned, betrayed by friends, naked, cold, hungry, shipwrecked, snake-bitten and even stoned because of his faith. Yet Paul never stopped giving thanks.

This is where his perspective on thanksgiving came from: In Romans 8:18 we read "*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us.*" He also wrote in Philippians 1:12, "*Now I want you to know brothers that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.*"

When like Paul we have the proper perspective we can give thanks in all circumstances. When we are going through some pretty rough patches in our lives, God is able to work in our lives and make us strong. He is able to help us through some pretty tough times that we could never face on our own.

3 Our Thanksgiving is expected.

Paul says we are to "*give thanks in all circumstances because this is God's will for you.*" That's pretty plain, isn't it? It is God's will for us because He knows that when we are grateful, and we expressed our thankfulness, and we are growing in it, our lives will be changed.

A grateful heart is a distinguishing mark of a growing Christian. For example, you can give a baby a bottle, and never once will that baby say "Thank you." You can bathe and clothe and otherwise care for that baby, and he will never say "Thank you." Sure, one of the reasons is that he can't talk yet, but a child has to be taught

to be thankful. It just doesn't come naturally. That's why you'll hear a parent say to a child, "What do you tell the nice man?" when that parent wants the child to express his thanks. It is expected, and the parent is trying to teach that child how to be grateful. When we realize how blessed we are by God, and learn to express it on a regular basis, we are growing as believers in Christ.

One pastor was visiting with a couple in northern England right after World War II. Food was still scarce, but the wife managed to prepare a very fine meal of fresh trout caught in a nearby stream, and some fresh vegetables gathered that day. The pastor enjoyed the meal very much, and when it was over, he thanked the lady for it.

She blushed and said, "Oh, sir, my husband never thanks me when I prepare a fine meal for him." The pastor wrote that he felt a little embarrassed for the husband. But he discovered that the husband was not embarrassed at all. He wrote that he could still see that man sitting there, saying, "Hey, Love, I wouldn't told you if I didn't like it."

God has lavished His blessings upon us, so much so that we could never count them all. But instead of thanking God, too often we complain. Too often we tell God when we don't like it, instead of thanking Him for His blessings on our lives.

David McLennon got his first job at age 13 working as a handy boy at a small-town grocery store. One day the store owner said, "It's time to take inventory." David had never heard that word before, so he asked, "What does that mean?"

"It's a time when we make a list of everything in the store," the owner explained. "Why do you do that?" David asked. The owner replied, "Well, it's easy to forget what's in the store. Only by counting each item can we actually know everything that we have."

"Taking inventory." That's what Thanksgiving is really about. When we stop to think about all the blessings that God has given us, we should stop and ask ourselves the question: "Have I taken inventory of my life recently? Have I made any effort to count all the things I do have in life instead of complaining about the things I don't have?"

This is not just a brief listing of all the possessions you have. This is a genuine examination of God's blessings on your life that reaches down into the depths of your soul. When you have been overwhelmed once again with all that God has

done for you, and all that He has given you, then express that thanksgiving to Him with joy and gratitude in your heart. Watch your spirit grow, in good times and bad. Giving thanks is God's will for every believer.

Mark Twain once said, "Don't complain and talk about all your problems--80 percent of people don't care; the other 20 percent will think you deserve them." But there's a better plan, and it's found in 1 Thessalonians 5:18-- *"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."*